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It's a bad time for job seekers with criminal records

Inmates are being released more quickly from jails and prisons in California, but in this economy, fewer employment opportunities await them.

By Alana Semuels, Los Angeles Times

November 30, 2010

Eddie Lemon has an associate's degree from Taft College near Bakersfield. He's certified to work as a sheet metal operator and to drive a forklift. He has experience as a dishwasher and a cabinetmaker.

He also has a criminal record.

The 47-year-old Lemon believes that has made it all but impossible for him to find a job in one of the worst economies in decades. And as prisons are forced to reduce their inmate populations because of overcrowding and budget shortages, some economists fear that could lead many of them back to a life of crime.

"In a bad economy, there are fewer jobs, and when people don't have jobs, they're more likely to commit another crime and get sent back to prison," said John Schmitt, a senior economist at the Center for Economic and Policy Research, a Washington think tank.

It's never been easy to get a job after getting out of prison. Most employers are hesitant to hire ex-offenders. They typically have limited education and spotty work experience, and they may have seen their skills atrophy during their time in lockup.

But what's different now, experts say, are two trends that have dimmed employment prospects even more.

One is a severe contraction in industries such as manufacturing and construction that have traditionally been more open to hiring people with checkered pasts. The other is a rise in the number of former inmates looking for work, as state prisons and county jails try to reduce their inmate populations to save money.

"We have a record high number of people coming out of prison each year into the highest rate of unemployment since the Great Depression," said Marc Mauer of the nonprofit Sentencing Project. "As difficult as the recession has been on people, it's twice as difficult for people with a felony to make it in this economy."

On Tuesday, the U.S. Supreme Court is scheduled to hear the state's challenge to a court order requiring California to reduce its prison population — now at 154,000 — by 25% over two years, which officials say could mean releasing or transferring about 40,000 inmates.

Even without that court action, however, a state law that took effect this year (also to reduce overcrowding) could cut the prison population by about 10,000 a year, largely by reducing the number of people who are returned to prison for parole violations, according to Joan Petersilia, co-director of the Stanford Criminal Justice Center.

"More people will in fact be coming home from prison in the next two to three years as a result of legislation to reverse overcrowding," Petersilia said. "But people are being released less prepared and are getting less help when they hit the streets."

County jails are under similar pressure. Currently, nonviolent offenders in Los Angeles County are serving only 20% of their sentences, down from 80% in April, when the budget cuts began, said Steve Whitmore, a spokesman for the Los Angeles County Sheriff's Department.

Hard data on joblessness among ex-convicts are hard to come by. Neither the U.S. Labor Department nor the California Employment Development Department track this information. Still, experts say studies and anecdotal evidence indicate that people have difficulty getting jobs after serving time.

"When the economy is doing well, former inmates will be the last ones hired," said Stephen Raphael, a professor of public policy at UC Berkeley. "When the economy slows down, they're the first ones fired and they have the hardest time finding work."

Along with the stigma of a criminal record, ex-offenders struggle with a lack of education. Few have college degrees, and more than one-third don't have a high school diploma, according to a recent study by the Center for Economic Policy Research.

That's led many to seek work in factories or on building sites, but those jobs are now scarce. In California, the construction industry has lost 323,100 jobs since the beginning of the recession; manufacturing has lost 209,700.

"There are an incredible number of folks seeking employment at the low end of the labor market," said Mark Loranger, chief executive of Chrysalis, a Los Angeles nonprofit that helps the economically disadvantaged find work. About 70% of Chrysalis clients have been in jail or prison.

While in prison, inmates also have fewer opportunities to learn trades. Vocational education programs in the state's prisons now serve 4,800 inmates, down from 9,400 in 2009, because of a \$250-million budget cut, according to Peggy Bengs, a spokeswoman for the California Department of Corrections.

Lemon, the former inmate, is staying with family in South Los Angeles until he can get on his feet, but he has trouble supporting himself. People with drug convictions can't get food stamps in California. Now he's applying for the bottom-rung jobs that he hopes no one else will want.

"Money got scarce. I took a chance and got caught," he said, about his 13 years behind bars for selling drugs. "Now I need something to keep me busy so I won't have to go out there and take another chance."

Adding to Lemon's plight are trades and professions that flat-out won't hire some types of ex-cons.

In California, various trade groups and laws limit people with certain felony convictions from working as real estate appraisers, medical billers, speech therapists, locksmiths, barbers, security guards, pest controllers, auto dealers, tobacco retailers, public school employees, home health aides, chiropractors and dentists, according to a Stanford University study.

The Census Bureau had more temporary jobs than almost any employer this year, but it too barred the hiring of people with certain felony convictions, including murder, robbery, theft and vandalism.

David Patterson, 44, got out of prison in April after serving 32 months for grand theft auto. He knows he's competing against thousands of other men as he applies for low-end jobs in restaurants and factories, even though the South Los Angeles resident would love to return to driving a truck, which he did before he went to prison.

But he also knows his record is stopping potential employers from calling. That doesn't seem right: He served his sentence, he said.

"They use your record against you," he said. "But if you already did the time, it shouldn't be an issue."